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Censorship by Fear?

A young man named Alfred W. McCoy has written a book, "The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia," in which he charges—as he did in a congressional hearing in June—that the Central Intelligence Agency has assisted in the flow of opium out of Southeast Asia.

When the CIA got word that Harper & Row, one of the country's most respected and careful publishers, announced that it was publishing the book, the CIA wrote the company that it could not "stand by and see baseless criticism . . . without trying to set the record straight."

After considerable deliberation, Harper & Row sent the CIA galley proofs of the book. A week later the CIA replied in a lengthy rebuttal that, in the words of a Harper & Row lawyer, left the publisher "underwhelmed."

McCoy has regarded the actions of the CIA in this case as an attempt to suppress his book. That may be too strong a statement; but it is hard to believe that the CIA wasn't trying at least to intimidate author and publisher and persuade them to tone down McCoy's charges.

In any event, it should be considered an obnoxious procedure on

the part of any federal agency to attempt to censor a book of this nature before publication.

The CIA's intervention in this instance brings to mind the experience of another publisher with a book that recently has appeared, Winter-Berger's "Washington Pay-off." Grove Press was to publish the book. It had its own legal authorities check it thoroughly for authenticity before deciding to take it on. Grove Press books are distributed by Random House. That organization decided, for reasons it has not disclosed, to refuse to distribute it. Lyle Stuart, who has made a fortune publishing controversial books, took on "Washington Payoff" and it has been selling at a lively clip. And so far there have been no libel suits.

The question here is whether some kind of silent censorship or intimidation led Random House to back out. The possibility that federal agencies and officials may be attempting by either subtle or overt means to prevent the publication of books that show them in an unfavorable light ought to be of deep concern to every American. It is through such efforts that dictatorships begin and perpetuate themselves.